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The Right Stuff

Times of Washington Is Attaining Credibility But Not Profitability

Conservative Daily Combats Its 'Moonie Paper' Image And Scores Some Scoops

Some Dissension in the Ranks

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WASHINGTON—The headline trumpets a White House leak: "President to Send Heckler to Ireland." And the nation's major newspapers and networks must scramble to catch up to the Washington Times.

The scene isn't uncommon these days for competitors of the "Moonie paper," as the Times was nicknamed when it was founded three years ago by members of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. Confronting skeptics, the Washington Times has established an influential niche with conservatives here, including those in the White House.

"We treat the Washington Times as a legitimate newspaper. They have a track record and have legitimate reporters," says Burton Pines of the Heritage Foundation, a think tank that works closely with the Reagan administration. Terry Dolan, the chairman of the National Conservative Political Action Committee, is even more enthusiastic: "It's the best newspaper in America," he gushes.

By the usual standards of newspapers, the Times has been a conspicuous failure. It has had minimal acceptance among advertisers, and it is losing \$35 million a year. Including the cost of the paper's palatial marble-and-brass headquarters in northeast Washington, its church owners have already poured \$200 million into it, and it is unlikely ever to earn a profit.

The Post Position

Moreover, the Times "hasn't made a dent in the Washington Post's grip as this area's newspaper," says Michael Robinson, the director of George Washington University's Media Analysis Project. The five-day-a-week paper's circulation of 88,570 makes the Times smaller than the Peoria, Ill., Journal Star; the Post, by comparison, boasts a weekday circulation of 736,000. Nor is the Times much competition in other respects. The paper averages

fewer than half the pages of the Post, with only pedestrian coverage of such topics as sports, local news, business and the arts.

But the Washington Times has made it big in other ways. Mr. Moon—whose critics say he runs a cult that "brainwashes" young people into believing that he is the second coming of Christ and who recently served 11 months in federal prison for tax evasion—is "very pleased" with the Times's impact, aides say. He has told supporters: "We now have a direct influence on Reagan through the Washington Times."

The paper's executives bristle at criticism of its ties to the Korean evangelist. "When I go on TV and I'm asked about 'the Moonie paper,'" says Arnaud de Borchgrave, its editor, "I say, 'Do you refer to the New York Times as a Hymie paper?'"

High-Level Readership

Editors of the Washington Times boast that theirs is the first paper President Reagan reads every morning. It is at least "one of several newspapers" the president tries to look at, the White House says. The administration also treats the Times well in providing leaks and interviews. The Times "provides supporting fire" for the president, says the White House communications director, Patrick Buchanan, and brings issues to Mr. Reagan's attention "that he might not otherwise read or hear about."

Some politicians, journalists and lobbyists scan the paper as a tip sheet for what the administration may do next. "It's the internal newsletter of the conservative movement," says John Buckley, the press secretary for Rep. Jack Kemp, the New York Republican.

While the Times doesn't generally showcase its Moon connection, it is at the heart of the evangelist's efforts to gain credibility and influence in the capital. His aides have won entree to Washington's power elite by donating millions of dollars to conservative groups and courting political, academic and religious leaders.

Welcome Financing

Tina Robinson, whose Conservative Youth Foundation depends on a \$250,000 grant from a Unification Church group to place student interns in congressional offices, says, "It's wonderful to find an organization that will put their money where their mouth is."

Not all conservatives are comfortable with Mr. Moon's activities. "They are capitalizing on the success of the conservative movement to advance their own designs," charges Ralph Reed, who turned down Unification Church assistance when he was the chairman of the College Republican National Committee. After James Whelan, the Washington Times's first publisher, was ousted in a bitter dispute over policy

and compensation in July 1984, he declared: "I have blood on my hands. I have legitimized the Moonies beyond their wildest expectations."

Yet many conservatives seem willing to overlook their reservations when it comes to the Washington Times. Some argue that the critics are racist and that the Times should have as much credibility as the Christian Science Monitor or the Mormon Church's Deseret News. And many praise the newspaper as a welcome relief from what they consider mass media's liberal bias. Editor de Borchgrave acknowledges that the Times has a mission that goes beyond just getting the facts or making money. It is an "alternative conservative voice," he says.

That mission often takes the form of conservative crusades that spill over onto the news pages, prompting staffers to joke about how "Commie-bashers" crowd out other stories. More important, there are widespread complaints in the newsroom that straight news articles sometimes are rewritten by editors to ensure a conservative slant. "The real problem here isn't religion, it's politics," says one editor, who asks to remain anonymous. "Even reporters who are really conservative are seeing things they don't like put in their copy."

Reporter Bill Outlaw, who left recently to take another job, says the paper's editors are "hurting their own cause" by unprofessional news practices. He recounts how, in a story he co-wrote, he referred to liberal Sen. Tom Harkin as a leader of the congressional opposition to financing Nicaraguan Contras. When the story appeared in the paper, though, the reference had been changed to: "Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, whose sympathies for the Sandinistas are well known."

Ron Cordray, a conservative Times reporter and former national editor who recently left the paper, was distressed to find that his news story about demonstrators at the South African embassy was changed without his knowledge to include what he considered inappropriate gibes at the demonstrators' motives. "The first few paragraphs were not mine," he says.

And when reporter Thomas Brandt quoted liberal Republican Sen. Charles Mathias ahead of conservatives in a budget story last year, the quotes were reversed to put the conservatives first. Executive editor Woody West then received a memo on the subject from managing editor Wesley Pruden. The memo caused a stir in the newsroom when some reporters stumbled across it in the paper's computer system. It declared that if a reporter quoting officials "could justify placing the emphasis either way, the choice should be a 'conservative' one." The memo added, "Otherwise we are not an alternative to liberal bias."

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Mr. Pruden neither confirms nor denies writing such a memo and suggests that copies provided by Times reporters may be "false goods." But his boss, Mr. West, recalls getting it from him and says that "I will concede the validity of the memo."

In an interview, Mr. Pruden says that he rewrites some stories to "polish" them and make them clearer, and he insists: "There's been no attempt consciously on my part to impart an ideological cast." But since "most papers unconsciously take" a liberal "baseline," he argues, "if you've unconsciously got something wrong, you might consciously have to work to correct it."

Certainly, not all Times reporters feel compromised. Jeremiah O'Leary, for years the respected White House reporter for the now-defunct Washington Star, says he "couldn't be happier" than he is at the Times. He and his colleagues have been responsible for a string of major Times exclusives—from the Heckler saga to the original story about Soviet double defector Vitaly Yurchenko ("No. 5 Man for KGB now Singing to CIA?" the headline read). Not all pan out, however. The paper was embarrassed when it declared in a banner headline: "Volcker Won't Get Second Term."

Some other reporters were particularly upset when Mr. de Borchgrave, in an unusual page-one editorial, began a fund-raising campaign for the Contra rebels and pledged the first \$100,000 from the Times. Some journalists, feeling a threat to their safety in covering the Nicaraguan conflict, as well as a blow to their integrity as journalists, circulated a petition in the newsroom. The petition got about 60 signatures before being withdrawn when word got out that presenting it would be regarded as a ground for being fired.

"If they don't like it, they're free to leave and work somewhere else," says Mr. de Borchgrave, who defends his action as part of the same newspaper tradition that drew newsmen to fight with Lincoln Brigade leftists during the Spanish civil war. Partisanship is appropriate, he argues, because the world is locked in an ideological battle in which the Communists have already duped or disarmed many U.S. media organizations.

That idea was also the theme of his best-selling novel, "The Spike," which he wrote during his days as a foreign correspondent at Newsweek magazine, before being fired in an editorial dispute several years ago. He says that the Washington Post, whose parent company owns Newsweek, is "completely taken in" by "self-avowed adversaries of this country," par-

ticularly in its Central America coverage. Post editor Benjamin Bradlee dismisses such charges.

Ironically, it was Mr. de Borchgrave who hired Mr. Bradlee in 1954 to be Newsweek's Paris bureau chief. When Mr. de Borchgrave became the Times editor early this year, he received handwritten congratulations and a warning from Mr. Bradlee: "I worry about your new patrons. Please, you worry too." Mr. de Borchgrave fired back: "We all know who my new bosses are, but do you have the same luxury?"

The 59-year-old Mr. de Borchgrave, who gave up his title as a Belgian count when he became a U.S. citizen, appears to have found a perfect home at the Times. Indeed, he has been living there ever since he took the job. "My bed is here," he says, pulling down a Murphy bed at one corner of his vast, elegantly appointed office. When he goes out, a chauffeured limousine is at his disposal, compliments of the Times.

The Times remains so far behind the Post and loses so much money—\$1.50 for every 25-cent paper sold—that rumors of its demise are inevitable. Some suggest that its news staff, which is roiled by constant turnover, will be pared to just 25 core people from the current 227 members. Others predict that the paper may be closed in favor of its slick new offshoot magazine, Insight. Church financiers have invested at least \$12 million in the magazine, which eschews identification with Mr. Moon and has lured advertisers by offering them initial free space and by offering free subscriptions to what it calls a prime audience of carefully selected corporate and political leaders.

But while Mr. Moon and his chief aide, Bo Hi Pak, refuse to be interviewed, other church officials say the rumors of imminent demise are untrue. And the Moon empire certainly appears vast enough to absorb the paper's losses. The evangelist's enterprises range from munitions, titanium, stoneware and ginseng in Korea and Japan, to the New Yorker Hotel in Manhattan, a major bank and gambling resort in Uruguay, fishing fleets and shipbuilding operations, and newspapers in New York, Cyprus, Japan, Korea and Uruguay. Observers say the businesses earn hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

In 1978, a congressional panel linked

Mr. Moon's business activities to Korean influence-buying in the U.S. and concluded that he had "ambitious and carefully thought-out plans for winning control and influence over political and other secular institutions." Seven years later, the far-flung nature of the Moon empire and the murkiness of its objectives continue to make some people suspicious. Paul Weyrich, a leader in the Religious Right movement, says, "People can get roped into an agenda, the origin of which they don't know, because a conservative group is pitching this in the context of their own activities."

Yet many other conservatives say that the Times proves the church's legitimacy, and they call for an end to the era of suspicion. "We're kindred spirits," concludes Mr. Dolan, whose anti-Communist Conservative Alliance received \$775,000 from Mr. Moon's Causa group. "I much more value my relationship with them than I do with most conservatives," he says, because they "don't have a hidden agenda."